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"LET MY PEOPLE GO."

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BY F. W. BIRD.

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"LET MY PEOPLE GO."

If the "strong swimmer in his agony" should refuse the hand stretched forth to save him because it was black, how would the bystanders say, "Let him drown!" The strong arms of over a million of loyal men are ready to aid our government in its imminent peril, and it rejects their aid; nay, it forces them to help our enemies. Over a million women are at work, in the field, in the shop, in the kitchen, in the nursery, feeding and clothing this rebellion. At a word they would all, over two millions, fight or work for us. Why is not the word uttered? O, they are only "*niggers!*"

This is only the selfish view of the matter. It is very humiliating that all our discussions of the question of emancipation view it only as a question of selfish policy. True, it can hardly be otherwise when the very existence of the government is at stake. Justice, Humanity, and Right appeal to deaf ears amidst the shock of armies; but Justice, Humanity and Right will yet assert their claims in this contest. "GOD helps the strong battalions," was the atheistic declaration of the despot—Prussian or French; but it is too late in the life of civilization to hurl masses of human beings upon each other as mere brute forces, Armies think; bayonets reason; rifled cannon utter the inspiration of ideas. On one or the other of the banners of the contending hosts is yet to be written "FREEDOM FOR ALL;" and with that banner go the impulses of humanity, the sympathies of the civilized world, and the overwhelming thunderbolts of Divine justice.

When the Angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherd of Midian "in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush," the Lord said: "I have surely seen the afflictions of my people, and have heard their cry, by *reason of their task-masters*. Now, therefore, behold the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me." "Go and say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my first-born. Let my son go that he may serve me; and if thou refuse to let him go, behold I will slay thy son, even thy first-born." This was the plain command of JEHOVAH, "Let my son go, that *he may serve* ME." He has served his master long enough. Let him go that he may serve me, or I will slay thy first-born.

And Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh: "Thus saith the LORD GOD of Israel, Let my people go that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness." A lying message. God said: "Let my people go *that they may serve* ME." Moses said, Let them go and hold a feast in the wilderness —only "three days' journey into the wilderness"—a respite from the tasks, a holiday, a little "gradual emancipation." God said, These oppressed people are my first-born, and I will treat their oppressors as their oppressors have treated them. Had Moses at once proclaimed to Pharaoh the whole counsel of God, who can say but he would have obeyed and averted all the plagues and all the blood which followed the temporizing policy of Moses and Aaron?

And Pharaoh replied, "Wherefore do ye, Moses and Aaron, hinder the people from their works? Get you unto your burdens." And the tasks were increased—no straw and yet the full tale of bricks; and the stupid people charged upon Moses and Aaron their increased burdens and sufferings, just as our agitators have been charged with aggravating the sorrows and rivetting the chains of the slave.

And Jehovah said, "I have heard the groanings of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage.

and I have remembered my covenant; and I will rid them out of their bondage and will redeem them with a stretched-out arm, and with great judgements." And again the command was utttered, "Let my people go that they may serve me;" and the oppressors refused, and the plagues came—blood and frogs; and Pharaoh relented; and promised emancipation if the curse could be removed; and the frogs disappeared and the oppressor broke his pledge. Doubtless, bricks were in great demand, and his cabinet were divided on the question. Again thundered the command, "Let my people go;" and the flies came, and the oppressor offered concessions. "Go ye, sacrifice to your God in the land;" and Moses proposed a compromise. "We will go a three days journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the *Lord*," doubtless meaning to take the "under-ground" to Canaan; and Pharaoh agreed, and the flies departed; and again the master cheated his slaves. Again came the command of Heaven, and again the refusal; and sorer plagues, murrain and hail; and Pharaoh's cabinet proposed another concession. "Let the men go;" and Moses, grown bolder, replied, "No; all, young and old, sons and daughters, flocks and herds;" and the insolent slaves were driven from the royal presence; and locusts and darkness succeeded; and another concession. "Go ye and your little ones; but leave your flocks and herds." and the arrogant slave rejected the offer, and left his master with the words of doom—"I will see thy face again no more!"

"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some Great Cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light."

The deluded king and people knew not the day of their visitation; and so there was joy in Egypt. True, they had suffered, but they had survived. The rub-a-dub agitation was silenced; the union between the oppressor and his victim was saved; the full tale of bricks was delivered, and the incipient insurrection was crushed with an "iron arm."

Pestilent fanatics no longer disturbed the public peace with false alarms; pretended prophets no longer repeated that exploded cry, "Let my people go;" order reigned in Egypt. When suddenly as a thunder-bolt at noon the awful judgement fell, and wailing went over the land "from the first-born of Pharaoh that sate on his throne, unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon"; and then from a blighted land and desolate families came the edict of emancipation—alas! too late.

And Pharaoh said, "Go, serve the LORD, as ye have said." "Also take your flocks and your herds, as ye have said, and begone; and *bless me also*." How was the pride of the oppressor humbled that he should ask his despised slave to bless him!

"And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said, we be all dead men."

And they "took their journey," the visible tokens of JEHOVAH'S presence, marshalling them on to the Land of Promise.

"When Israel, of the LORD beloved,
Out of the land of bondage came,
Her fathers GOD before her moved,
An awful guide in smoke and flame.

By day, along the astonished lands
The cloudy pillar glided slow;
By night, Arabia's crimson sands
Returned the fiery column's glow."

And even after all this, the insane lust of oppression prompted an attempt at re-enslavement; and "the LORD everthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea."

The parallel between this history and our own suggests itself. For now thirty years the conscience of the nation has been earnestly addressed, and every willing ear has heard that solemn demand—"Let my people go that they may serve me"; and we have refused, and the plagues have come. War—war in Florida, war with Mexico, war upon every right of freemen; and our manliness has been eaten out, and plagues worse than flies and lice and frogs combined have infested pulpit and press and politics and

social life, and, so that the full tale of cotton and sugar was delivered, we have been content; and in our pride and power we have said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey his voice? I know not the LORD, neither will I let his people go."

And now, suddenly as a thief in the night, comes the beginning of the end—the wail for our first-born is heard in the land. Is the heart of the nation still hardened so that the last vial of the wrath of God *must* be poured out? Already the smoke and flame of burning store-houses and plantations stir the rapt enthusiasm of the fugitives at Beaufort, as the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night inspired the fugitives from Egyptian bondage. As one reads the following from Hilton Head, a slight stretch of imagination carries one back to the triumphal procession led by Miriam with timbrels and dances:

"May river and McKay creek were both placid, and the gleam of burning cotton-houses fell across their silent waters. All up and down the stream no sign of life was perceptible, where a month ago small boats and steam craft were constantly plying; no planter's house on the shore was occupied; no planter's boat put out into the water; the negro quarters were illuminated by the glare of the conflagrations, and the long lines of their squalid huts looked in the gloaming like tents illuminated by camp-fires. The black oarsmen chuckled with infinite glee at the evidence of southern fear. They finally broke out into singing as they rowed, and in their strangely plaintive minor strains expressed a satisfaction that to unaccustomed ears was quaint enough in utterance. The utterance was not, however, altogether uncouth. Though the jargon at first seemed so utterly incomprehensible that we thought it vain to listen to the separate syllables, after a while a coherency was evident, and the blacks themselves said they were singing 'spiritual hymns;' the word 'joy' was frequently repeated in the peculiar refrain. And so these fugitives, escaped from bondage, served the conquerors of their former masters, along the waters they had so often crossed when slaves, and sang songs full of significant yet plaintive exultation; the words were joyful, though the notes were sad, for slaves had never learned to sing in other and triumphant keys."

"Rude seems the song; each swarthy face,
Flame-lighted, ruder still:
We start to think that hapless race
Must shape our good or ill;

That laws of changeless justice bind
Oppressor with oppressed;
And, close as sin and suffering joined,
We march to fate abreast.

Sing on, poor hearts! your chant shall be
Our sign of blight or bloom—
The Vala-song of Liberty,
Or death-rune of our doom!"

Is the parallel to be perfected? Now that the madness of the slaveholders has released us from every possible constitutional obligation to slavery; now that in the providence of GOD the hour of emancipation *has struck*, shall we, the twenty millions of the free states, in a vain attempt to re-inslave those whom GOD has summoned to freedom, bring down upon ourselves the final judgement, which, not only in Egypt, but in all ages and everywhere, He has visited upon the oppressor who has turned a deaf ear to his warnings? "As the LORD liveth" He will deliver His people; dare we follow them into the Red Sea?